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AUTHOR Rees, Ruth
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ABSTRACT

The influences within the Ontario educational system perceived by teachers, department heads, and principals as affecting their evaluation policies and practices were studied. Interviews were conducted in the 1987-88 school year as part of the Ecology of Evaluation research project conducted in Ontario and British Columbia. About 50 elementary and secondary educators were interviewed in Ontario, with about half being teachers. All three levels of educators reported that factors associated with the Canadian Ministry of Education, school boards, and school policies influenced the ways in which they evaluated students. Some of the influences were identified as constraints, but many were identified as being resources for the educators and sources of practices for better recordkeeping and achievement reporting. Respondents also indicated that they received support for their evaluation efforts from their peers more often than from educators at a higher level in the same school. Support from people at a higher level was more likely to come from the district or the Ministry of Education than from within the school. Findings highlight the importance of two areas needing greater recognition: (1) a distinction that should be made between evaluation in theory and in practice; and (2) the informal network of peer support that influences evaluation practices. (SLD)

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE ONTARIO EDUCATION SYSTEM ON EDUCATORS' EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

BY

RUTH REES, PHD

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
KINGSTON, ONTARIO

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROVINCIAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ON EDUCATORS' EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES.

Ruth Rees; Faculty of Education, Queen's University; Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

The paper reports the sources and types of influences within the Ontario educational system, as perceived by the teacher, department head, and principal/school leaders of both elementary and secondary school on each of their evaluation policies and practices. Some of those influences, as identified, were considered by some to be constraints; other influences noted in the research, but some of those same influences, were listed as being resources. The research indicated that, overwhelmingly, educators receive support (in terms of evaluation resources) from their peers -- people within the same (lateral) level of the profession, rather than people from within a higher level. Few practitioners reported assistance as coming from educators at a higher level within the school, but from either the school board/district office or the provincial Ministry of Education.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ONTARIO EDUCATION SYSTEM ON EDUCATORS' EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report the influences within the Ontario educational system as perceived by the teachers, department heads, and principals affecting their evaluation policies and practices. The different levels of influence potentially acting upon in-school educators are the Ministry of Education, the school board officials, school managers (principal and vice-principal), department heads, and teachers.

This paper reports one aspect of research which was carried out in a federally-funded (SSHRC) project entitled the **Ecology of Evaluation**, undertaken in the 1987-88 school year by Professors Robert Wilson and Ruth Rees. A model (adapted from Beer) was proposed which was intended to describe the devolution of educational policies and practices as applicable to a provincial education system/hierarchy. Within that project, research was carried out to, first, identify all the evaluation policies and practices (dealing with student achievement, guidance and counselling, special education, program evaluation, and teacher evaluation) and, next, to show how these policies and practices devolved through the system.

An aspect of that research project, the focus of this paper, was to identify the types and sources of influence that those in-school educators perceive as affecting their evaluation policies and practices. The assumption driving the research was that policies and practices are intimately intertwined with their environment, the ecology or setting in which the policies and practices reside. As schools must carry out many of the system-imposed policies, it was assumed that the in-school educators would be influenced by evaluation policies and practices within the educational system or hierarchy. This research was intended to identify influences as perceived by school practitioners.

A second aspect of the research was to investigate the types and sources of evaluation assistance or support existing within the educational system, as perceived by those same practitioners. Lortie (1975) documented the limited support of the education hierarchy. He observed that teachers

> accord secondary position to officially designated sources of help...**Informal channels are preferred to the institutionalized means, and the peer group rather than administrative superiors is seen as the most salient source of classroom ideas**.
>
> That teachers do not depend greatly on the school hierarchy for technical assistance is supported by responses to a national survey conducted by the NEA (1967). (pp. 75-76) [author's italics]

Questions were asked to ascertain not only who within the provincial educational system provides supports to these educators, but also how they provide this assistance. In doing so, the intention was to update Lortie's 1975 observations, i.e., to verify whether informal rather than formal channels of communication are used; and if colleagues are perceived as being more helpful than "administrative superiors".

The Methodology

As part of the **Ecology of Evaluation** research project, educators at a maximum of five levels of the system were interviewed in order to describe evaluation policies and practices within two provincial educational systems -- British Columbia and Ontario. In all, just less than one hundred educators were interviewed, with approximately half of them being teachers, divided equally between the two provinces. The levels contained within a provincial education system are the classroom as managed by the teacher, the department head, the school management team (principal and vice-principal), the school board, and the Ministry of Education. Within Ontario, two school boards were chosen for study: one large urban school board, one smaller and rural board. Four schools were chosen within each of the two boards: two elementary schools and two secondary schools. Within each elementary school, the principal and two teachers representing each of the primary (grades K-3) and junior (grades 4-6) areas were interviewed. And within each secondary school, the principal, four department heads, and four teachers were interviewed (one from each of the four departments representing arts, language, social studies, and sciences). The sample was selected in order to gain a broad base of responses in this preliminary study on evaluation in practice.

Teachers, department heads, and school managers (principals and vice-principals) were asked the following four similar questions in face-to-face interviews.

1. Are there department, school, board, or provincial policies that affected the way students are evaluated? If so, what were they (with respect to department, school, board or province)?

2. What were the effects of these policies on evaluation practices?

3. Did any of these levels (departments, school, board, or province) provide evaluation resources that were useful in developing or implementing evaluation policies and practices? If so, what were the resources and who provided them?

4. Did any colleagues/peers provide evaluation resources that were useful? If so, what were the resources and who provided them?

Data were gathered from eight schools in two boards in Ontario. Below are the responses to those four questions.

The Findings

1. Are there department, school, board, or provincial policies that affected the way students are evaluated? If so, what were they (with respect to department, school, board or province)?

In responses to question 1, teachers, department heads, and principals in both the elementary and secondary panels reported the influence of the superordinate levels within the educational system which affected the way students are evaluated.

The influences of the **Ministry** were perceived as stemming from the Education Act and Regulations, reports such as The Formative Years, The Early Primary Education Project, OAIP, results of provincial-wide program reviews, and curriculum guidelines, in particular the OAC course outlines indicating the content, proportion of time on certain topics, and the weighting of the final grade. As well, OSIS policy statements standardizing the course coding and grading system, that a variety of evaluation instruments should be used, and that evaluation instruments should incoporate individual differences were mentioned as affecting the way students are evaluated.

School board influences on teachers, department heads, and school officials were also identified. Examples of those influences were reported as the boards' standardized testing policy, the boards' renewed emphasis on evaluation and school evaluation policy, mandated curriculum, board-developed curriculum guidelines, board- initiated growth schemes and indicators to assess growth, and board policies regarding the types and frequency of reports made to parents of student achievement -- e.g., board or school-designed report cards, the number of formal reporting periods, informal reporting to parents, the frequency of parent-teacher interviews, a policy that all students must be evaluated prior to the reporting periods, and a policy that all students must write the (common) final examination.

Teachers and department heads described **school** policies which affected the way students are evaluated. Some of the directives issued from the school administration were that students must be monitored closely and that marks were to be monitored by (one) department head, that teachers must adapt their teaching to meet the needs of the students, certain courses and subjects have final examinations, the number of term tests, the weighting of term work and the final examination, tests to be content-based, the minimal mark that a student must obtain in order to be recommended not to write the final examination, the composition of the final marks, the development of common final examination and its marking system, the types of items to be included on examinations, and a policy student absentiism from a

test or an examination.

2. What were the effects of these policies on evaluation practices?

Elementary teachers reported that, as a consequence of these above policies, tests were criterion referenced, with summaries and examples of the student's work kept in the files; the daily work and the test results of the student are used as the basis for reporting to parents in parent-teacher interviews; the objectives of the core documents are followed; and that the standard board report card for grades 1 to 6 means that some skills not usually assessed in those grades, such as listening and speaking, were evaluated.

Secondary teachers said that they included both objective and subjective item types on tests and examinations, made changes to the grading system (to include both criteria and weighting), reduced the weighting and hence effect of final examinations, had content which was influenced by the Ministry and school board, adapted curriculum to reflect provincial reviews, and made general and advanced level courses available in preparation for the OAC's. To this list, the **department heads** added that the content of the courses was mandated, as was the distribution of time on each topic; promotion was formalized; the grade 13 students may be required to write standard final examinations; teachers must identify more ways to evaluate, and less reliance on tests and examinations; and as guidelines changed, courses of study have been rewritten to reflect both the downgrading of tests and the impact of the process of learning, through such tactics as giving marks for writing processes, independent study, and work and study habits.

The effects of these hierarchical evaluation policies and procedures on **principals** were that Ministry Education Act and Regulations have been followed; and as mandated by the school board, standardized examinations were administered, final examinations have been given, students are being evaluated, report cards are completed, and schools (at one board's request) have developed their own student evaluation policy.

3. Did any of these levels (departments, school, board, or province) provide evaluation resources that were useful in developing or implementing evaluation policies and practices? If so, what were the resources and who provided them?

Teachers, department heads, and school principals responded that the evaluation resource suppliers were almost entirely from the board and the Ministry levels. No evaluation resources were mentioned as coming from departments heads; only two teachers mentioned the support from the principal and vice-principal; one superintendent was helpful to a principal; and one principal and a department head said that teachers within the school and department supplied some evaluation resources.

The **Ministry of Education** was credited with supplying curriculum guidelines and accompanying publications such as English and Evaluation Resources for the English Curriculum, OSIS, OAIP, program review documentation, and seminars on several OAC subjects covering the topic of evaluation. The Ministry's specialist courses offered through the universities also were mentioned as a resource.

Several resources were identified as coming from the board, and specifically from subject consultants or coordinators. The boards provided the curriculum containing sample evaluation resources; supplies and support material were available from the teacher resource centre. One board's publications on writing skills included the grading criteria. One board provided a booklet for teachers on how to prepare their students for the board's standard exam. The booklet outlined the content objectives, the previous year's examination and the marking scheme, as well as information to the student. Teachers on the subject councils were identified as being helpful. As well, standardized tests supplied by the board, such as CTBS and the Edward and Foo mathematics tests for students in grades 3, 6, and 9 were considered as resources. Furthermore, one board has a criterion-referenced test item bank for a subject for grades 3 to 8 which the schools found useful.

Several other resources were identified, none being within the system per se. Books (textbooks and reference books), teachers' guides, journals, and subject specialty books were also specified. The book Teaching to Pass was considered useful; several workshops followed up this approach. Provincial professional associations were also included as being helpful.

4. Did any colleagues/peers provide evaluation resources that were useful? If so, what were the resources and who provided them?

The **elementary teachers** in the study indicated that for the most part, they relied on themselves alone. Their colleagues were the only other source of information in the form of sharing worksheets, giving a workshop to one's peers, using colleagues at the same or another schools with whom to brainstorm and assess ideas and concerns.

All others, however, i.e., **secondary school teachers, department heads, as well as elementary and secondary school principals,** responded that that main supplier of evaluation resources was their professional colleagues.

Teachers in the same or other schools act as resources, particularly those teaching the same subject. The sharing occurs at different levels, more often on a one-to-one basis or on professional development days, and in such ways as developing and marking examinations together, sharing examinations, developing a marking scheme for an examination, sharing ideas and resources such as filmstrips, using another's tests as a guide or

as a pretest. Colleagues teaching different subjects provided evaluation resources, such as a checklist to assess student participation and a mark for "cleanup".

Either department heads (within the same or other schools) or other subject teachers were reported as being helpful to **department heads**. Colleagues provided criteria for evaluating students' oral work and have developed their own items banks, vetted by other teachers of the same subject. Discussions with other teachers on their teaching techniques, other department heads; informal chatter on professional development days; discussions with elementary and university teachers; and discussions with teachers in other schools whose students performed well in the subject (math) contests, all supplied evaluation information. Moreover, subject teachers comprising a department heads' council (or like term) were reported as sharing equipment and ideas and have contributed to the development of subject evaluation policy and item writing.

Principals said that they received support from other principals, either as a group or one-to-one, on all issues, not just on evaluation. They have met as a group by area, by board, by region, and at conferences. In addition to this peer support, the school leadership team, specific subject teachers, and the staff were mentioned as providing evaluation resources to principals.

Conclusions

One objective of this research was to determine the influences (types and sources) within the educational system on evaluation policies and practices of practitioners -- teachers, department heads, and principals. From the research, these three groups of educators reported that they were indeed influenced by educators in other levels within the educational system/hierarchy -- those at the Ministry, school board, and school level. Moreover, the practitioners were able to articulate the source of that influence (e.g., frequency of evaluations, criteria and weighting of components towards final mark). All indicated that these influences changed aspects of their in-house evaluation policies and practices. The structure imposed by the school board has an effect on both how and on what the students are evaluated: anecdotal comments, checklists, numerical or percentage grading systems; subjects; and school-based or system-wide examinations.

The second objective was to reveal the types and sources of support that these same educators perceived as receiving. The major finding was that, overwhelmingly, the largest source of support for school educators were their peers -- principals for other principals, department heads and teachers giving support to other department heads, and teachers assisting teachers, especially teachers of the same subject. This collegial support was found to occur both informally and one-to-one as well as formally and in groups, either facilitated by the board or in

their professional associations. Elementary teachers perceived more informal and less formal collegial support than did teachers in the secondary panel. Lortie's findings, then, were reaffirmed in this research, where "informal channels are preferred to the institutionalized means, and the peer group rather than administrative superiors is seen as the most salient source of classroom ideas" (1975, p. 75).

Sources of support in terms of evaluation resources other than colleagues were described as coming from the Ministry and the school boards. Some of those same influences were identified, but this time as being a resource, e.g., provincial curriculum guides with evaluation guidelines. Other resources were described as the provincial instrument pool; program reviews; standardized tests, some system-wide; various text and reference books; professional development activities; board-level subject specialists, board teacher/curriculum resource centre; and old provincial examinations.

The evaluation policies and practices articulated at superordinate levels within the provincial influence those in-school practitioners' evaluation activities in many ways. Yet, most of the information and resources concerning evaluation appear to be coming from the practitioners' own professional peer groups.

These findings suggest two areas for future consideration. First, a distinction between evaluation-in-theory and evaluation-in-practice should be made. Practitioners are not isolated individuals; rather, they are nested within an education system. That interconnected system, as a result of legislation, policy, and practices, alters evaluation activities within the school, department, and classroom. Second, the peer support (informal) network should be acknowledged and incorporated into the professional development schema of educational practitioners.

In conclusion, to understand why educators are doing what they are doing in terms of evaluation practices, both the hierarchical and lateral channels and influences within the education system must be identified and understood. The ecology of evaluation, i.e., the environment in which evaluation is conducted, does affect the practice of evaluation.

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